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Types of Social Support Associated with Depression in the UK Adult Population

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Abstract: Many well-established sociological studies pertaining to the salubrious link between social relations and mental health have been published. In particular, numerous researchers address the issue of how social isolation and lack of family support and social ties can adversely affect one's mental well-being. In this paper, we seek to identify and explore the relationships between people who were clinically diagnosed with depression and the aspects of their social environment, namely their social and family circumstances in the UK adult population. One hundred and ten blogs mentioning depression as their main condition were selected from a mental health support website, Time to Change, for analysis. As not many studies have analyzed such narratives, we expected the analysis to provide a fresher and deeper understanding of the experiences of those afflicted with depression. We observed that there is a consistent discourse emphasizing the importance of social support from close loved ones, in particular friends and family members. There is evidence that social circumstances can be mediating factors in depression.

Keywords: Depression; Social relations; Blogs; Content analysis

1. Introduction

The rates of depression in the world are staggering. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over 300 million people in the world suffer from depression and that the total estimated number of people living with depression had increased by 18.4% between 2005 and 2015^[25]. It is also ranked as the single largest contributor to global disability (7.5% of all years lived with disability in 2015) and reported as the major contributor to suicide deaths, close to 800,000 per year^[25].

In 2017, 2290 participants in the UK were surveyed to understand the prevalence of self-reported mental health problems, levels of positive and negative mental health, and actions people took to deal with the stress of everyday life^[20]. The most commonly reported mental health problem was depression – more than 4 in 10 respondents said they have experienced depression. One in five adults also reported that they had considered taking their own life at some point. Indeed, these worrying figures around mental health in the UK are a matter of concern and vital study.

1.1. Purpose of the study

There are several approaches to studying depression. Many in the medical field seek to understand mental illness in terms of its biological causes and symptoms^[5,9], such as structural, functional, and molecular alterations in the brain^[7]. However, while it is useful and important to look at it from a medical point of view, social relations may be as important as

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psychological and hereditary factors. In fact, for decades, it has been suggested that religious, social and political factors, and social environment^[11,10,18] may be adversely related to mental health. There have also been studies which document how strong social relations are related to lower morbidity and mortality rates^[20].

In this study, we will be looking at online narratives written by people who are or have been experiencing depression. Weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known, are gaining enormous popularity since its introduction in the late 1990s^[6]. They consist of dated entries that can provide an in-depth understanding of the writers' experiences, thoughts, and beliefs^[12]. Many of those suffering from health issues, mental or otherwise, may seek out advice, help or support and share their experiences online. Hence, we feel there is value in analyzing these means of communication as a way of understanding the role of social support in coping with depression. We can understand more about how social support and interactions are effective in supporting this community. In addition, blogs offer unsolicited personal entries that are not influenced by the researcher^[8]. To address issues of ethics in using blogs as our main source of data, we adopted the "fair game-public domain" position, in that since there is no effect on the market value of the works and the extracts used are small and non-substantial, this research will be affected by "fair use" restrictions^[8]. Furthermore, we will not be using blog usernames and will remove or any potentially identifying information from the extracts.

We will be looking at depression from a sociological perspective: How do social relations affect those who report that they are or have been depressed? What types of social relations are strongly associated with supporting this group of people? We believe that answers to these questions will serve to strengthen the supportive aspects of informal helping networks and may provide a basis for a new partnership between lay helping resources and professional helpers. This will contribute in many ways to the well-being of individuals, families, and society. However, a review of literature revealed that most researchers concern themselves mainly with finding and analyzing associations between mental health and social support^[17,22] and social causes of mental health problems^[23]. There is a need to also explore the sources of social support associated with those who report feeling depressed and how and what social support means in practice^[19]. Hence, it is hoped that this analysis will provide an alternative but equally important view of social support and depression. This will help us identify the condition-specific types of social support relevant to those who report feeling depressed. In the following section, we discuss research relating to social support and depression.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Depression and social support

Depression is characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness, and poor concentration^[25]. Depression can be long-lasting or recurrent, significantly impairing an individual's ability to function at work or school or cope with daily life. When long-lasting and recurrent, it can become a serious health condition. At its most severe, depression can lead to suicide. Depression has become such a concern that WHO has called for a comprehensive, coordinated response to mental disorders at country level since 2013^[25].

In its simplest terms, social support refers to help or resources that are provided to an individual from members of their social network to cope with stress^[11]. As only a small proportion of those in distress seek professional help, many others may obtain informal social support from friends and family. Social support may affect illness outcomes and daily functioning, and many people with mental illness, including depression, may depend on informal networks for support^[10,18].

Lin (1986) offered the most detailed definition of social support: "The perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners" (pp. 18-19)^[2]. He also described three layers of social support:

1. Outer and most general layer: Comprises the individual's participation in voluntary organizations, such as church activities and school events, and demonstrates the extent to which the person identifies with and participates in the social environment at large. The involvement may not be on a personal basis, but the sense of belonging to and being part of the social environment is substantial.
2. Second layer: Consists of the social networks through which an individual has direct and/or indirect access to

others. These relations provide a strong sense of bonding, as they signify concrete links to others.

3. Innermost layer: Involves the presence of confiding partners. Such relations tend to be reciprocal and mutual, and there is shared responsibility for one another's well-being.

These three layers of social support vary in significance on an individual's support system. It is believed that the innermost layer has the strongest effect on one's mental health and well-being^[2]. This has also been shown in many other studies (see Pernice-Duca^[13] for a detailed study on family network support).

In our analysis of the blogs, we shall investigate if this applies to those who felt depressed. As shown in Figure 1, we have combined the outer and second layer to be the external layer, with secondary social relations and the innermost layer as the internal later, with primary social relations.

2.2. Previous empirical research

Compelling evidence shows a salient relationship between one's social relations and mental well-being. In a review of the data collected from more than 15,000 individuals aged 16-92 years who responded to The North Denmark Region Health Survey 2013, Pedersen *et al.* (2017) observed that a lack of all aspects of social relations was a risk factor for poor mental health^[21]. Indeed, the odds for poor mental health increased as the individual's rate of contact with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors decreased^[21]. The "Surviving or Thriving?" report by the Mental Health Foundation (2017) highlighted some of the strategies that people adopted to cope with poor mental health; among the more popular ones were talking to a friend or family member about their day-to-day life and spending time with family and friends^[20]. One reason may be, while many people may experience a degree of mental distress at some point, few would seek professional help; hence, they are likely to seek informal social support from family and friends^[19]. In a friendship, individuals spend time together and keep in contact mainly to enjoy each other's company^[11]. This can be considered as one aspect of social support, as people are likely to turn to someone they know and trust in times of crisis^[19]. Sangalang and Gee (2012) also found evidence that support from family was associated with decreased odds of depression and anxiety symptoms among Asian Americans in their nationally representative sample^[16]. While these studies may demonstrate the positive benefits and impact of social support, we also need to understand the types of social support that is associated with different mental disorders.

For these reasons, it is crucial that we identify and improve supportive interactions that can help these individuals who may suffer from depression so that they may function as effectively as possible.

3. Research Design

Time to Change is a campaign that began in England in 2007 to improve public attitudes and behavior toward people suffering from mental health problems^[24]. There are several reasons why we chose this campaign. First, they work with various communities, schools, and workplaces to reduce mental health-related stigma and discrimination. In addition,

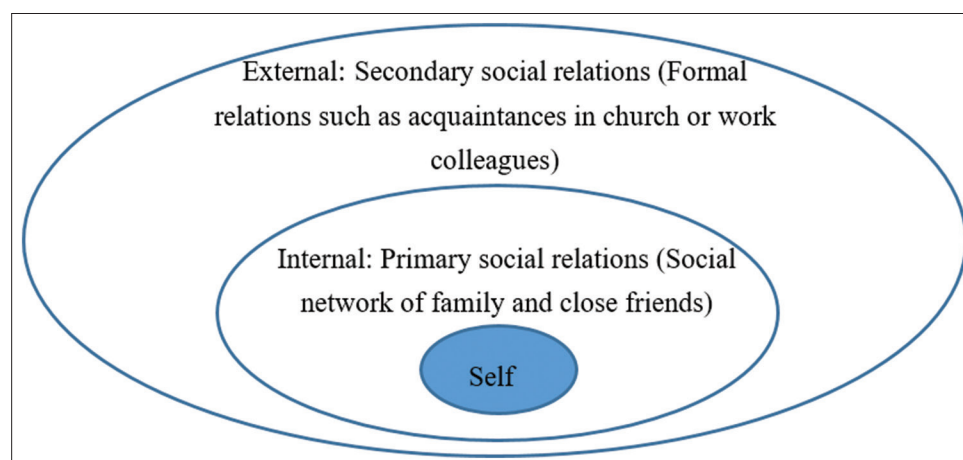


Figure 1. External and internal sources of support.

the campaign is run by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, and funded by the Department of Health, Comic Relief and the Big Lottery Fund. Finally, one of the ways in which they reach out to the public is by encouraging people to share stories of mental health problems in their blog. Thousands have submitted personal stories to their website. Hence, they have a significant impact on the UK population. For this study, we selected 110 out of a total of 220 blogs dated from May 15, 2012, to May 14, 2013. This was to ensure that at least one full year's worth of content can be analyzed and the content will not be affected by seasonal factors; during winter months, circadian rhythms may precipitate the onset of depression^[4]. Eligibility criteria were that the blogs focused predominantly on depression as the main condition experienced were written in English and that the blogger was living in the United Kingdom. The rest of the blogs was focused on other mental illnesses, such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. There were 110 bloggers in total, and they each submitted one blog. Each blogger was assigned a case number. Content analysis is the method of choice here as it is "intricately linked to more recent conceptions of symbolic phenomena" which can be seen "in the context of a changed awareness about human communication, the existence of new media, and the roles they play in the transmission of information in society" (p10)^[1].

The main objective here would be to determine which and how often sources of social support are mentioned in the experiences of those who feel depressed. We will be using the three layers of social support mentioned earlier to guide us through the content analysis. It is essential that the research objective be clearly specified, and the dimensions for analysis clearly identified so that they will not be missed out during the coding process. This also ensures that our analysis is performed appropriately and substantiated by the data^[1].

3.1. Content analysis

When analyzing the data from the blogs, we used a content analysis approach consistent with Miles, Huberman, Huberman and Huberman's (1994) "content analytic summary table" (p.183)^[3]. Here, we used a single-case content analysis approach to analyze relevant content, that is, we identified and examined the types of social support that the bloggers are engaging in during their depressive episodes. This will provide us with an overview of what types of social support are most prevalent. We then generated a summary table to obtain an overview of the types of social relations that are associated with persons with depression.

The text was coded in terms of the central theme in the texts, i.e. who their main source of social support was. Ten categories were created, as seen in Table 1.

These ten categories were derived from literature review; they can be found in both the innermost and outer layers of support that in one's social environment. It was also essential to determine if the support mentioned was positive or negative; a note will be made when it is a source of negative support or discrimination. In addition, if more than one source of support was mentioned, we will only consider that which is more dominant.

4. Findings

We identified three main sources out of the ten forms of social support from the data: Friends, family, and online community (Table 2). Two were from the innermost layer, while the third was from the outer layer. Table 2 shows the themes and the frequency with which it was mentioned by the bloggers. From this table, we can see that almost 75% of the blogs cite friends, family, and the online community as their main sources of support.

4.1. Friends

Support from friends was found to be the most commonly cited. Most respondents revealed that when they first spoke out about their conditions, only some friends were supportive.

For Blogger 15, she had experienced different reactions from friends when she shared with them that she had depression. She wrote that:

The majority of my close friends have been absolutely wonderful and supported me all the way through.... However, the reactions have sadly not always been as positive. I found some people tried to smother me after I told them.... other friends took a less caring approach and responded very negatively.

Categories created	Dimension	Social environment
Friend(s)	Social/family relations	Innermost layer
Family (parents, spouse, children, loved ones)		
Mental health/medical profession	Social relations/social activities	Outer layer
Mental health community (online and offline)		
Local/general community		
Work		
School	Religion	
Religion		
Media	External	
Authorities		

Table 1. Categories of codings used in content analysis

Main source of social support	Number of blogs	Frequency (%)
Friends	39	35.5
Family	32	29.1
Online community	11	10.0
Total	82	74.6

Table 2. Main sources of social support

Blogger 32's experience was similar:

Luckily, during those desperately ill moments, although I may have lost some friends I also gained some incredible ones at unexpected times and from unexpected places.

Blogger 76 felt that she owed her recovery to her friend:

I am so glad I confided in her because it made me realize that having a friend's support can make a huge difference to your recovery. It is because of her that I am still here today, living my life to the full; proof that a friend really can save your life.

In all, 35.5% of the blogs mentioned the support of a friend as their main source of social support. This is the highest proportion in the analysis.

4.2. Family

Familial support, especially by parents, was also found to be helpful. 29.1% of the blogs mentioned that their family provided them with much-needed support through their difficult period struggling with depression. This was the second highest proportion, after friends.

Blogger 14:

When I talked to my Mum it was like an enormous weight had been lifted.... She was kind and tender. She allowed me to talk about what had been going on in my life and we finished our talk with a hug and tears, a few tears on her part too.

Blogger 99:

I learned the true value of my family. Their love is worth more to me than any amount of money. ...There is still a long way to go for me but talking, and especially writing, about my experiences has made all this a lot easier. Sometimes I just need a kind word or a hug to give me a lift. A text or a short phone call can make all the difference.

Blogger 50 had a similar experience, saying that after she told her family about her problems with depression, she "was surrounded by love and affection the likes of which I didn't even know existed." By speaking out, others know what they are experiencing and are able to provide support.

4.3. Online community

The internet is a relatively new phenomenon, and 10% of the blogs mentioned blogging as the main source of support itself. Many spoke about the stigma and ignorance surrounding mental health and have since started personal blogs and support sites to help others.

Blogger 23 mentioned about how meaningful she has felt her blog journey to be:

The response to it has been incredible. I have had messages of congratulations and support from strangers and also heartfelt confessions of depression from people I've not seen for years. People have told me that in reading my words they feel I've visited their inner thoughts and written them down. To know that sharing my story is helping people is amazing.

In fact, her blogging journey started when she was exposed to others' blogs about coping with depression:

One of the things that really helped me get through this dark time was reading. There are so many incredible blogs out there, where people speak honestly and truthfully about what they've been through.

Blogger 69 felt that he was in a position to help those who are going through depression, as he had gone through depression himself:

Having gone through depression myself, I decided to set up an awareness and support system for fathers/carers, for people suffering with postnatal depression called (information removed).

For Blogger 60, she has not only started a photography project to educate others about depression, she but also started a blog to share her experiences:

I have also started writing a personal blog, which again I hope will help others see they are not alone in their struggles.... We are not alone, we have each other and we can get through this and help each other.

Hence, online support websites and blogs allow people who have experienced depression or know of such people to share information and experiences with each other online and raise awareness of mental health. They provide a platform on which people can come together and discuss about issues and solutions, and at the same time, able to derive support from their readers. Much can be studied about how such support websites can provide support for those with mental health issues.

5. Discussion

This study provided additional evidence that the two most common forms of social support were friends and family; together, they make up more than half of the blogs (64.6%). Indeed, there is a consistent discourse emphasizing the importance of support from the innermost circle of the support system, that is, one's family and friends. In a survey about support for mental health problems in the UK, 71% of the respondents also reported receiving informal support from family and friends; a common comment was that this support was vital for them^[5]. On this note, the quality of the relationship matters more than the quantity. Although many bloggers have reported that they lost friends after they spoke up about their condition, the remaining friends proved to be supportive.

This study also highlighted the benefits of online communities for depression. This source scored the third highest among the blogs. As the popularity of online social networking has increased, so has the research exploring the psychosocial benefits and safety risks associated with this new technology^[15]. In this case, many people who have suffered or are still suffering from depression have turned to blogging and/or starting support websites for others in the same situation. For them, blogging is in itself a source of social support for both the blogger and their readers. It can be inferred that the writers' main motivations were to raise awareness of the impact and effects of the condition, as well as what helped them through it. We can tap into its potential as a form of help for those suffering from depression. Although some bloggers were initially averse to discussing about their conditions, most of those who did found support and understanding from those that they shared with. Indeed, they encouraged their readers to do so, as they felt that with care, concern, and support from others, it is easier to cope with the debilitating effects of depression. Such social support, although online and not face-to-face, also promote positive feelings which elevate one's sense of esteem and confidence. For example, it was found that girls used blogs to build a sense

of community^[6]. In addition, the vast majority of young adults in a research sample believed that social networking reduces social isolation^[5]. In this aspect, it provides a means of garnering and distributing support to those who find themselves in the same situation and are in need of advice or encouragement. These bloggers evidently found online support to play a role in the management of their conditions. Furthermore, through their blogs, we can gather more information on other sources of support and how they help them. Ultimately, those who have successfully coped with the effects of depression can become sources of hope for those who are still struggling^[19]. Another point to note is that previously communities were thought of in geographical terms, but now they can also consist of people who share interests, beliefs, and experiences^[19].

Limitations in this study included a lack of more detailed information on frequent contact with other people as a form of social integration, strength of the social ties and the fact that these are people with self-reported diagnoses of depression. In addition, the sample only included those with access to the internet and who have shared their experience online through blogs. Despite these limitations, this study has provided an insight into the types of social support that people who report feeling depressed have sought out. Furthermore, these also suggest directions for future research. Those who report feeling depressed can be interviewed in detail about their sources of social support. Questions on the frequency of contact and closeness of social ties will improve our understanding of the role of social support in their lives. Another research direction worthy of pursuing would be online social support networks. A strength of this paper is the analysis of blogs, which would boost the research on the effects of connecting with others using online networks. As of now, there is no clear picture as to how helpful such online networks are^[19], but the topic is generating increasing interest^[12,14]. This paper is also an attempt to collect data from a relatively new source of data-blog posts.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that social circumstances can be mediating factors in coping with depression. A bout of depression can be said to be a result of negative life events, abuse, genes and even the chemical imbalances in the brain, but there will be an overlay of social conditions such as availability of support and feeling loved and cared about that will affect its manifestation in the population.

Different scholars may have opposing opinions about mental health and the policies and support pertaining to it. Even medical professionals and therapists have different approaches to treating and managing mental health issues. However, it remains the fact that many people who suffer from mental health issues require support and assistance in their daily lives. More attention has been paid to physical diseases such as cancer and diabetes. Yet mental illnesses can be a cause of disability and even death, not to mention the emotional pain suffered by those afflicted. It cannot be emphasized enough that the amount of social support and the presence of social relations play a role in the development of depression. The practical importance of these results is significant; as when we are able to determine that certain groups are more vulnerable to developing depression, more funds can then be channeled toward helping them. Furthermore, we are also able to perform a risk assessment for those who are likely to develop depression. It is time now that we focus more efforts on helping those with mental health issues to cope and manage the symptoms and conditions.

Evidence found has shown that social circumstances can be mediating factors in coping with depression. A bout of depression can be said to be a result of negative life events, abuse, genes, and even the chemical imbalances in the brain, but there will be an overlay of social conditions such as availability of support and feeling loved and cared about that will affect its manifestation in the population.

7. Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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